



Women's Resource Center

Serving Victims of Family Violence and Sexual Assault

YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse is a problem no one wants to face.



However, we will not end abuse by pretending that it doesn't exist or by merely hoping that it will go away. We can best protect our children by giving them information about abuse and by making sure that information is accurate. We must give them the knowledge and the confidence they need to defend themselves from strangers, from friends and from family members.

The sexual abuse of children is a subtle, deceptive crime. The best weapons sexual offenders have are silence and secrecy. **We must disarm them!**

What Is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child Sexual abuse is any sexual act imposed upon a child by an adult or adolescent. It can range from exhibitionism, to fondling, to oral sex or intercourse.

Experts agree that the abuse

of children is a vastly **under-reported** crime. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of cases are reported in the United States each year. Some startling statistics related to the sexual abuse of children include:

- Approximately one of every three rape victims is under sixteen.
- Approximately one out of every four girls and one out of every twelve boys will be sexually abused before they reach age eighteen.
- Over 75% of the victims are abused by someone they know.
- At least 30% of the victims are molested by a relative.

The Victims

The victims of sexual abuse are male and female. They range in age from infants to adolescents. They are from all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and religious backgrounds. Children who suffer from emotional deprivation or low self-esteem are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse. There are other factors which add to children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Their trust of and fondness for a familiar adult lessens resistance, and while children are cautioned about the dangers of sexual abuse from strangers, they are rarely informed about the possibility of sexual abuse within the family.

Whatever the approach, sexual abuse occurs when the child

is alone and defenseless.

The Perpetrator

There is no "typical" offender. There are no class, age, sex, racial or income barriers for offenders. The child abuse is as likely to be a professional or executive as an unskilled or unemployed worker.

The majority of sexual offenders are gentle with their child victims and the offender usually does not threaten or harm them. Their interaction is immature or harm and playful and generally the abusers represent no threat to the physical well-being of their victims. Many offenders evidence feelings of extreme powerlessness. Acting out sexual desires toward children becomes a way to compensate of and regain their perceived lack of power.

Child molestation is commonly not an act of the moment. Rather, typical offenders know in advance that they will see out a child for exploitation. The offense itself may occur that night or next week or next month: rarely does the molestation occur without a "warning feeling".

Sexual Abuse Within The Family

Sexual abuse of children within the family is the most hidden form of such abuse.

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Incest is not limited to a few geographical areas nor to the lower socio-economic classes. Social, economic, religious, ethnic or geographical factors have very little to do with the incidence of incest.

Incest cases typically occur within a family for years prior to discovery, with some cases going undetected for ten years or longer. Incest is not necessarily confined to one child within a family. Frequently it may involve children sequentially by age in the family. Sometimes more than one child may be involved at the same time. The sexual activity is usually repetitive and progressive.

However trivial or coincidental the first approach to the victim may have been, there is a tendency to for the sexual coercion to become repetitive. While it is often deceptively non-violent. It is more powerfully compelling and more totally disabling than any "strong-arm" attack from a stranger.

In an incestuous or intrafamilial family, the non-abusing parent, who might be expected to protect the child, is typically isolated from the problem. Sometimes that parent is so insecure and threatened by the possible loss of the abusing spouse and the fear of scandal, that considering, suspecting or even knowing, suspecting or even knowing that a child is or could be at risk seems impossible.

Indication Of Sexual Abuse

How can one tell if a child is a victim of sexual abuse? There are indicators or "signs" which may mean that the child is, in fact, a victim. While these signs can indicate many other problem areas for children, a combi-

nation of several of the following signs may indicate that sexual abuse is in progress.

- Sudden changes in behavior
- Excessive withdrawal, difficulty relating to peers, isolation.
- Sudden loss of appetite or excessive weight gain
- Difficulty concentrating, excessive daydreaming
- Avoidance of one or more family members
- Unusual seductiveness with classmates and other adults
- Reluctance to go home, or running away from home
- Unusual fear of certain places (e.g. restrooms, bedrooms)
- Exaggerated awareness or interest in sex or sexual terminology.
- Refusal to change for physical education classes
- Unusual fear, distress or secretive behavior
- Unusual fear of men/boys or women/girls
- Unusual clinging to a trusted adult
- Suicide attempts
- Unexcused or repeated absences from school
- Symptoms of psychosomatic-illnesses

Some Physical Indicators Of Sexual Abuse

- Visible bruising, redness or tearing about the anus or genitals
- Inflammation about the eyes, mouth, genital or

anus

- Presence of discharge from the genital/anus area
- Unusual discharge or odors from venereal disease or semen
- Complaints of soreness or pain in the genital/anus area
- Painful urination or bowel movements or avoiding same
- Chronic complaints of lower abdomen or pelvic pain
- Pregnancy or venereal disease
- Repeated abortions
- Evidence of other forms of abuse
- Use of drugs at an early age

Some Family Indicators Of Sexual Abuse

- Social isolation of the family in general, and children in particular
- Extreme over-protectiveness of children, especially with regard to activities which may take them away from home.
- Extreme role reversals between parent and child
- Extreme domination in one parent's role and extreme passivity in the other parents role
- Extreme over-reaction by parents to children receiving any kind of "sex education"

Myths And Realities Of Child Sexual Abuse

Myth: Sexual abuse of children is a relatively rare occurrence

Fact: Child sexual abuse is

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not rare. About one-half of all the victims of child abuse are victims of sexual abuse.

Myth: Most assailants are strangers

Fact: 75% are known to the victim and over 30% are family members

Myth: Abusers are always adults

Fact: Teenagers or young children can be the perpetrators of child sexual abuse

Myth: Children make up stories for revenge or attention

Fact: Children rarely lie about sexual abuse

Myth: The victim's behavior or appearance causes the abuse

Fact: Children **DO NOT** ask to be abused. Responsibility is with the perpetrator, not the victim.

Myth: Children are powerless to protect themselves

Fact: Children can be taught to use their own resources—kick, yell, run, get help

Myth: Victims are always females

Fact: Approximately 9% of all men were sexually abused as children

Myth: Children shouldn't be taught to "tattle"

Fact: There is a difference between "tattling" and reporting a problem.

Responding To A Child's Report Of Sexual Abuse

Traditionally, incest and sexual abuse of minors carry with them our society's strongest taboo and it is natural for adults to react in horror, panic, disgust, shock, disbelief or anger when this crime is revealed to them. However it is **vital** to the disclosing child that the adult maintain a calm, compassionate and understanding attitude.

The sexually abused child who receives early, sensitive support is less likely to suffer permanent emotional scarring and deep trauma as a consequence of the abuse. If a child confides in you about sexual abuse, you have probably been chosen because that child believes that you are the only adult in whom it is safe to confide. The child needs your immediate support and assurance. The child's well-being must be your **first** consideration and **primary** focus.

Reassure the child that you believe the report, that it was right to tell someone, and explain that the difficult situation does not have to be faced alone. Victims of sexual abuse need assurance that they are not to blame for what has happened to them.

Children who disclose abuse incidents aren't looking for revenge. They just want it to **STOP!** And remember, very rarely are such reports unfounded.

Reporting Of Sexual Abuse

Among the decisions faced by an adult, upon learning a child has been a victim, is whether or not to report the incident to the authorities. If the assailant is a friend or relative, this choice can be truly agonizing.

Sexual abuse is a crime, no matter how young the victim or what the victim's relationship is to the offender. Child abuse usually involves repeated incidences and, while adults may be able to keep the assailant away from the victim in the future, the offender may succeed in victimizing some other child. For the protection of all children, child sexual abuse needs to be reported, no matter how difficult it may be to make the report.

Some persons are **MANDATED BY LAW** to report **SUSPECTED ABUSE**. Effective in California as of January 1, 1981, Penal Code sections 11165 through 11174 require that individuals or organizations working with children and/or families **MUST** report when they **reasonably suspect** abuse or neglect of a child under 18. Included among those who are **mandated** to report are: medical care practitioners; child protective agencies and personnel; any "child care custodian"; non-medical practitioners; etc.

Protection Against Abuse

The safest child is the child who is aware of potentially dangerous situations and has learned good survival skills from adults. If young people

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hear us speak openly about the issues of sexual abuse and know they can trust us to believe their reports, they will be freer to share their painful secrets with us and break through the silence barrier.

The sexual abuse of a child is usually followed by a demand for secrecy from the perpetrating adult, sometimes coupled with threats of future harm to the victim or the victim's loved ones if the silence is not maintained.

Children need to be equipped with the tools to realistically deal with the danger of sexual abuse in the same way they are taught fire or traffic safety. The best strategy for preventing child abuse is to provide information and resources to the potential victims. We must prepare our children with as much knowledge as is appropriate for their age and encourage them to use that knowledge. Efforts to prevent abuse can also lead to improved early detection of cases already in progress.

How Can You Help?

- Acknowledge the fact that child sexual abuse does occur and is taking place around you.
- Act on any suspicions you might have about such abuse by reporting it to the

proper authorities.

- Be an "approachable adult" by being open, educated and outspoken regarding sexual abuse of children.
- Share your knowledge with your own children, friends, relatives and others.
- Discuss sexual abuse prevention with the same tone of voice as when teaching fire, traffic or water safety.
- Explain that abusers may be family members.
- Teach children their personal protection rights and personal protection skills.

Personal Protection Rights

Children need to know that they have the right to protect themselves from adults, be they strangers, friends or family members. They need to know that:

- Children have the right to feel free from worry and to be safe from harm.
- Children have the right to know that their bodies are their own private personal possessions.
- Children have the right to say "NO!" to anyone who wants to touch their bodies without their permission.
- Children have the right to seek help from outside the family if none is available within.

- Children have the right to be informed of resources available to them should they become victims of sexual abuse.
- Children have the right to have their instincts respected when they feel uncomfortable about someone—even a relative.
- Children have the right to decide when affection will be accepted and from whom.
- Children have the right to be informed about dangerous situations and how to handle them if they should arise.
- Children have the right to have their complaints believed without being called tattletales or squealers.

Once adults have given children the information they need for their protection, children may still be exposed to or be victims of sexual abuse, BUT they will know that there are alternatives to participating in a disturbing secret.

FOR EDUCATIONAL PRESENTATIONS AND PREVENTION INFORMATION, GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING CONTACT: Women's Resource Center (760) 757-3500 1963 Apple Street, Oceanside, CA 92054

TO REPORT SUSPECTED CHILD ABUSE CALL:

Child Abuse Hotline (County Wide)

24 hours (800) 344-6000

LAW ENFORCEMENT:

Carlsbad Police Dept (760) 438-5511

Oceanside Police Dept. (760) 439-7296

Escondido Police Dept (760) 741-4721

Sheriff's Dept

Vista (760) 758-6401 Encinitas (760) 753-5591

Poway (858) 748-7400 Fallbrook (760) 728-1115

